



A NOVEL IN A NUTSHELL

A THIEF OF FIRE.

By STANLEY PORTAL HYATT.

"I SHALL go away," said M'ducu decisively.

The other looked up from the axe-shaft he was carving.

"Why?" he asked.

"You Mashona know nothing," explained the boy; "I am going to learn. I will go amongst the white men, and they shall teach me the magic which makes them so much stronger than the black people. Then I shall come back, and the Mashona will fear me—I shall be a mighty chief—I will rule you as my fathers did, before the white man came."

The goat-boy rolled over, and regarded the speaker with scornful wonder. "You are a fool indeed," he remarked. "The white man will make you work. You will eat the food of pigs, and the sickness will burn your heart. As for their magic, they hide that too well!" And, roused to unwonted energy by his indignation, he threw a stick at a half-starved cur, which fled, yelping.

M'ducu was annoyed; the dog was his, and the speaker's tone jarred.

"You are the fool," he retorted. "You are only a Mashona. I am a Matabele. I did not say I was going to the mines—I am going to the teachers who practise the white man's witchcraft."

The goat-boy snorted: "You speak of going, yet you have not thrown the bones with old Maramba, the witch-doctor, to find if it will be lucky."

"Maramba is a fool," M'ducu retorted; "and the bones lie—a white man told me so. I shall learn better magic than that. The Mashona know nothing."

For a moment the goat-boy was speechless, horrified at the blasphemy; then, "Son of a hyæna!" he snarled, "you had better go now; for when I tell the old men, they will kill you."

M'ducu smiled derisively. "I am going. Some day, though, I shall return and teach the people. The Mashona will fear me; and the women will brew beer for me. But you I shall kill, for the name you called me"; and, taking his sole possessions—a torn blanket and an assegai—he whistled to his dog and stalked off with such dignity as befitted a future chief.

"He will never come back," the old men decided that evening, after they had discussed the question from all aspects. "He has no family, no ties. Why should he come back?"

But one girl knew better, though she sobbed bitterly in the shadow of the grain-huts. "He promised me, and he will keep his word; but when, oh, when?"

The goat-boy, chasing a sheep which had broken its tether, found her there.

"Ah!" he said, "you are crying for him, for that M'Hlengwi dog who lived on our bounty. He will never come back. He has fled to the evil spirits his brothers."

She turned on him like a tigress. "He is not an M'Hlengwi, and you know it. He is a Matabele, and the son of a chief. One day, he will come back; and I shall tell him to kill you. I shall see you die, N'Jova."

Three years had passed, and the wanderer was almost forgotten, an indistinct memory to all save one man and one woman.

The goat-boy was merged into the young warrior; and the girl was now of an age to take up that burden of drudgery and sorrow, the married life of a native woman. Her fate was already decided—she was to marry her old enemy. Her father was dead, but her elder brother had arranged the matter. He had been long-suffering with his sister; had pointed out the impossibility, the wickedness even, of waiting for a vagrant stranger, who had doubtless long since joined the rest of his accursed tribe. She had listened to him

in silence, but her resolution had remained unchanged. At last, however, his patience had become exhausted, and at the great beer-drink in honour of the new moon, he had beaten her unmercifully, beaten her until the tough shaft of his assegai broke.

She lay where he left her, bruised and hopeless, and, in the excitement of the drumming, the incident was soon forgotten. Finding herself alone, she crawled away to the shelter of some bush, and lay down exhausted, sick at heart, vaguely praying for death.

In the morning they discovered her, and dragged her back to the village. Worn out in mind and body, her spirit seemed broken, and she sullenly gave way to her brother's wishes.

"I told you he would not come back. He is dead," N'Jova growled that night.

"He will come back," she answered wearily. "He will come back, and kill you. If he were dead already, his ghost would haunt you, and you would be dying miserably." The man shuddered in the darkness of the hut. He longed to beat her, but he feared the possible vengeance of the absent man, or, worse still, of his spirit.

The spring changed into summer, and the summer to autumn. The grain was ripe in the fields, and the hearts of the Mashona were glad, for the harvest was good.

One night, as the tired women were slowly making their way back to the kraal, they saw a small procession winding down the narrow footpath on the opposite slope: two cows with calves at heel, a man in European dress, leading a heavily laden pack-bullock, and, last of all, a woman with a child on her back.

The girl stopped to watch them. Something in the man's carriage struck her. "It is M'ducu," she said, then noticed the woman and child, and turned cold.

The strangers came on to the village, the cows breaking into a run as they caught sight of their fellows in the kraal. The pack-bullock struggled to free himself, but the string galled his nose, and he was forced to follow his master in amongst the huts. The man tied the rope to a tree-stump, and then, as if accustomed to the place, made his way to the fire round which the men were squatting. He sat down in silence, whilst the others peered at him suspiciously in the dim after-glow. Someone stirred the fire, which broke into a flame, and revealed his identity to one man at least, for N'Jova started. "M'ducu!" he gasped.

"Yes," answered the stranger, "I have come back; have you no greeting for me?"

They broke into a chorus of salutation and hand-clapping, for the despised orphan had returned, apparently rich and flourishing: he had cattle, and many goods, and a wife, perhaps money as well. So they shook hands, the double handshake of deep cordiality, and inquired of his doings.

He was ready, anxious even, to tell the story. He had been far away, very far, right to the heart of the Matoppos Hills. There he found a white teacher who taught for nothing, who even paid the people to learn. The teacher was a fool, it was true, and troubled them with much useless magic; but some things he taught were very good. He, M'ducu, had learned the reading and writing of the white man, his witchcraft of singing and praying, and his charms and omens. Then he, M'ducu, had taught others, and the white teacher had paid him well. Besides which, he used to practise the witchcraft himself, appease spirits of the dead and read omens, so that, at last, he had been able to buy cattle and blankets and calico from the teacher, who bade him go home and practise the white man's magic amongst the Mashona.

[Continued overleaf.]

The old men listened in silence. Then the chief thanked him guardedly, and asked where he would live.

"Here," he answered. "I have seen the White Chief, and he agrees. I will buy food at first; but, afterwards, the people I teach will feed me."

The old men grunted, and looked dubiously at one another. The matter required consideration and much throwing of bones, for, as everyone knows, matters arranged without consultation with the spirits always end in disaster.

The newcomer inquired after old acquaintances, but merely in a perfunctory manner. Filled with a mighty self-sufficiency, he regarded his former companions as mere savages. He, with his clothes and his knowledge, was almost a white man. N'Jova he recognised, but had apparently forgotten his animosity. The women he ignored.

The girl had slipped past him, unregarded, and prepared the evening meal; but as she stirred the bubbling, seething mixture, she was filled with a mad desire to go to him, to see if he had really forgotten, whether there might be extenuating circumstances in his case, as in her own. She looked out, undecided, but he sat by the fire talking, and his eyes never wandered from the circle of men's faces. He was explaining his own cleverness, his superiority to other men; and in his elevation, as in his future, she had no part.

That night N'Jova beat his wife. "M'ducu has come back, and has forgotten you. Now you are mine indeed," he said.

And she bowed her head in silence.

The next morning, she met M'ducu face to face. He looked at her a moment in perplexed wonder, then greeted her casually as an old acquaintance, whose existence had been forgotten until her presence recalled it. And instinct told her that he was acting no part. He had indeed forgotten, whilst she had suffered, as she thought, for him.

The new teacher showed little inclination to begin work. He chose a site for a hut, and, after much haggling, engaged two men to build it. He himself was above manual labour, he explained. His work was to teach them the foolishness of their ways, to prove how much better was the witchcraft he had learned from the white men.

Meanwhile, the old men were troubled. Many and long were the discussions held whilst the younger people were busy with the harvest. There was a schismatic in their midst, a man who was like one of themselves, yet who scoffed at their knowledge and their charms. And he intended to make others share his views. It was a terrible prospect. If the young men should cease to respect charms, whose property would be safe? The spirits, too, would doubtless avenge themselves on the village for harbouring such a man. The whole affair was perplexing, deplorable; for M'ducu was under the protection of the white men, and could not be removed by violence.

A month passed in uncertainty on the part of the old men; inaction on that of M'ducu. Then, one day, an eagle was seen perched on a dead tree hard by the village. This is an infallible sign that some spirit is uneasy, so the local witch-doctors were called hastily, and, after much throwing of bones, it was discovered that the ghost of a former chief was wandering on the mountain, and could not rest in peace until a black-and-white bull had been sacrificed.

Seated on a great boulder, M'ducu scornfully watched the orgy. He would take no part, he said; he knew better magic than that.

He could see the dying struggles of the sacrificial beast and the smell of blood came faintly to his nostrils. He half-regretted his clothes and his education. He felt the meat would be good; the beer, too, would be refreshing, for the night was hot. To quell the rising temptation, he strolled away; but a sudden burst of drumming drew him back irresistibly. He was ashamed of his weakness, yet he wavered, possessed with a horrible longing to join the yelling troop of dancers, to tear the half-raw flesh with his teeth. But it was impossible. He was of the white man's creed; almost as good as a white man; and yet—the maddening throb of the drums, the rattles and horns, the smell of roasting meat, the weird chant (now a mournful wail, now rising to a yell of triumph), the dusky, sinuous forms gliding in the uncertain firelight, roused the savage's nature, which was ever latent under the veneer of civilisation. He was hesitating, and, a moment later, would have been amongst the drums, when, in one of the songs, he caught the name of his race. Matabele! Yes, he was one of them, and these others were but Mashona dogs. Matabele! With a sudden feeling of disgust, he turned away, and strode down the path towards the pool. A woman was coming towards him, carrying a pot of water for cooking the entrails of the victim. In the clear moonlight, he recognised her,

and stopped. Once more, his true nature asserted itself. Again he seemed to drift back over the space of years; the present was forgotten, and he was in that dead past in which she had seemed the fairest thing on earth, and when all his world lay within that little valley. She saw the old look in his eyes, hesitated a moment, then fled, as another dark form appeared at the bend of the path behind the man.

With an effort, M'ducu pulled himself together. Muttering a curse on his own folly, he passed on to the pool, and sat down beside the water, vainly trying to exorcise the ghosts of the past which seemed to press round him, to fill the air, to insist on his attention.

Suddenly he started as someone touched his arm. The girl stood before him, his assegai and knobkerrie in her hand.

"Go!" she said. "They are mad with beer and dancing, and are going to kill you. N'Jova has told the old men that you are a wizard, that you can break charms without harm coming to you, that you will bring the evil spirits to the village. Here are weapons. Go!"

At the sound of her voice, the past was bridged over, annihilated, and once more they were boy and girl, all in all to each other. His wife, his future, his peril even—everything was forgotten. He took her in his arms.

She struggled to free herself. "You must go," she repeated. "They will kill you."

"And you," he asked, still holding her; "would you have me leave you, now I have found you again?"

"I will go, too," she said. "But we must hasten."

At the thought of danger, he became a man again, but not the man of a few hours previously; now he was a warrior—and a savage. He threw his European garments away, as if he loathed them, and stretched his arms, revelling in the unaccustomed freedom.

The girl looked at him proudly.

"You are a warrior again, my beloved. Let us go."

The sky had clouded over, and the darkness was intense. At first the path was easy, for she knew every stone and turn. But when they left the valley they stumbled along painfully. As they descended the rocky slope of a kopje, he heard a cry, and a rattling of stones. She struggled to her feet, only to fall back with a moan.

"My ankle is broken," she said. "You must leave me."

"Never," he answered. "They would kill you. Now we must live or die together. I will carry you."

He lifted her gently, and she clung to him like a child. At first, it seemed easy, as if he could go on for ever; and he said to himself, no fate could be sweeter. But years of an idle life had sapped his strength. He was constantly forced to stop and rest. Again and again, she begged him to leave her, to escape whilst there was yet time.

Dawn found them at the foot of a giant kopje. He laid her down tenderly beside a small stream, and leaned wearily on his assegai. Suddenly, he looked up, and saw his pursuers. At the same moment they perceived him and raised the war-cry of their tribe. In an instant his weariness was gone; he was once more a warrior and the son of a chief. They were Mashona and he was a Matabele, a Zulu, with all the Zulu's contempt for the inferior race. He had lived his life amongst Mashona; but he would die a Matabele. They were dogs, and he was a lion.

The girl looked at him in pitiful admiration, then, with a sob—

"Kill me now," she said.

"I cannot," he answered brokenly.

But she insisted. Anything would be sweet at his hands, even death; but if they took her alive—and she shuddered.

Then she bent her head to the blow of the knobkerrie.

As the warm life-blood spurted over him, his enemies rushed up. He saw them through a haze of red, which seemed to grow ever denser, until the other figures disappeared, and, in a mist of blood, he could see but N'Jova. The war-cry of his nation rang loud above the yell of the Mashona, and, for a moment, the latter paused, terrified at that dreaded slogan . . . they closed in . . . He was dimly conscious of wounds given and received, of his blood flowing, of a smarting pain . . . The haze grew redder and thicker; but the figure of N'Jova was always clear . . . At last, it seemed near him. He saw the face grow sick with fear, as it read death in his eyes; then, as it turned to flee, the heavy Zulu assegai went home. The shaft broke in his hand. With a last shout of triumph and defiance, a shout which echoed and re-echoed up the valley, sending even the rock-rabbits scurrying to their holes, he flung the stick in the face of the nearest man, then fell dead across the body of the girl.

As the sun appeared above the line of kopjes, the first vulture swooped down. The hyenas found but bones.

THE END.

Black and Gold: Poe's "Tales of Mystery and Imagination."



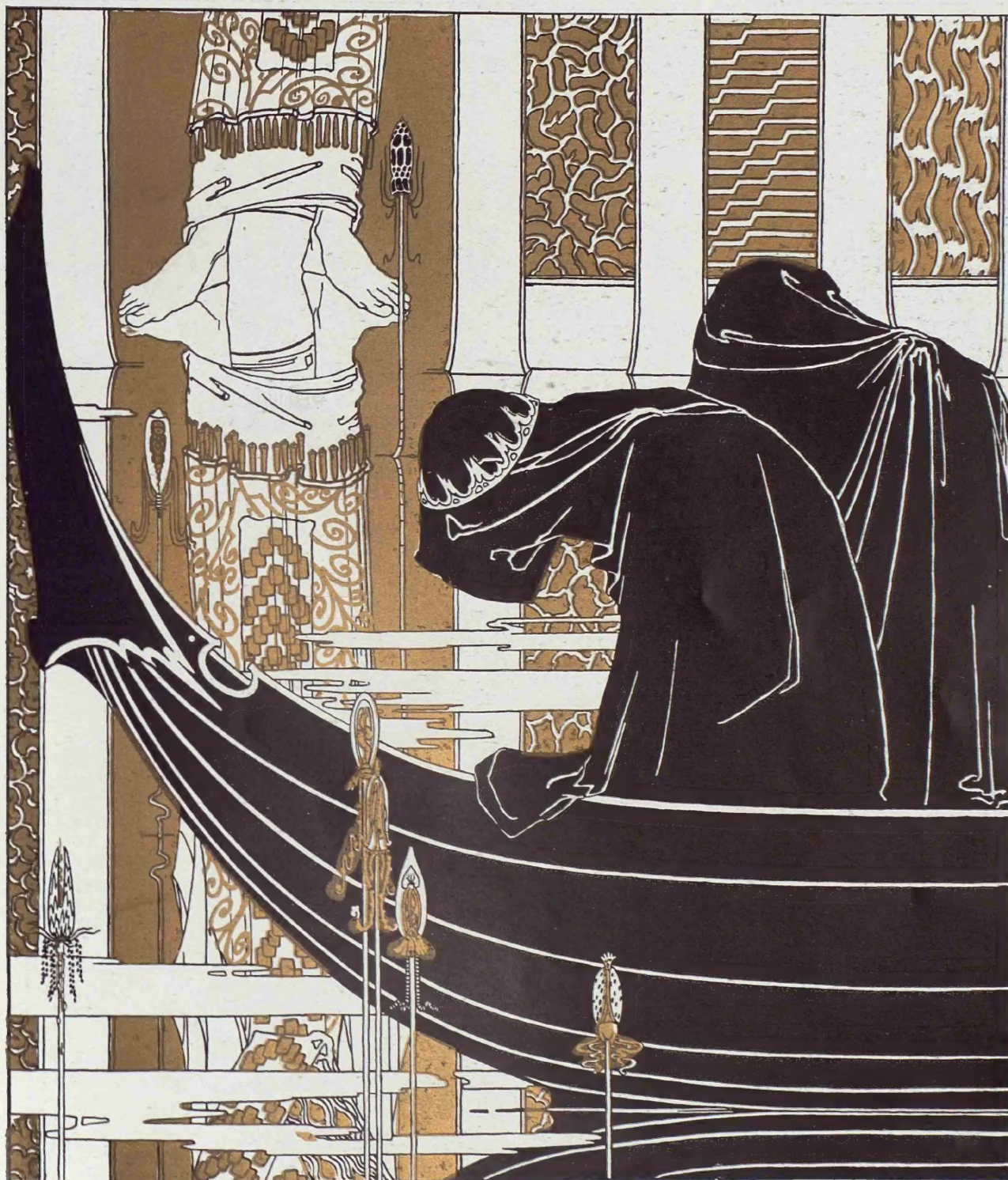
II.—"THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER."

"I shall ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. . . . An excited and highly distempered idealism threw a sulphureous lustre over all. His long improvised dirges will ring for ever in my

ears. . . . If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least—in the circumstances then surrounding me—there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe."

FROM THE DRAWING BY THURBURN.

Black and Gold: Poe's "Tales of Mystery and Imagination."



IV.—"MORELLA."

"Nor was I indeed ignorant of the flowers and the vine—but the hemlock and the cypress overshadowed me night and day. And I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark, and its figures passed by me, like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only—

Morella. The winds of the firmament breathed but one sound within my ears, and the ripples upon the sea murmured evermore—Morella. But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second, Morella."

FROM THE DRAWING BY THURBURN.



A NOVEL IN A NUTSHELL

THE WRAITH OF UNCLE SAMUEL.

By WILLIAM FREEMAN.

UNTIL the beginning of the year I'd always got on pretty decently with my Uncle Samuel. Not that we met often. He generally turned up during the summer, when there was a decent moon, and again in the late autumn, when there were mists drifting over the park, and in the panelled room at Christmas. But he was never what you could call an intrusive ghost. "Fully authenticated, but absolutely inoffensive," was Uncle Samuel's motto. Jigberry's "Guide to Bunchester and Neighbourhood" gave him a paragraph all to himself: "The old manor-house, still in the hands of the Delabois family, is said to be haunted by the ghost of Sir Samuel, the second baronet, who in 1670 married a beautiful young Frenchwoman attached to the Court, and who—though the murder was never proved—was said to have been poisoned by her a year later. The lady went back to France, and the estates passed to Sir Samuel's younger brother." *Et cetera.*

It was late in March—the 25th, to be exact—when I came upon Uncle Samuel in the hall. I caught sight of him near the door. He gave a gusty sigh of relief when he saw me, and materialised a bit more sharply.

"Hullo!" I said. "This isn't your usual haunting-time. Anything wrong?"

He nodded moodily, and stared down at his puce leather and be-diamonded shoes.

"Cough it up!" I said.

And then, for the first time since I'd known him, he started something like a coherent conversation. I gathered that in some way I'd disappointed the old chap—badly.

"But how?" I asked.

"This—this world-conflict—" said my Uncle Samuel.

"Not my fault that the doctor's turned me down," I told him. "It's the Delabois knee—gives out after an hour or so's marching. You ought to know all about that. So I've had to stay at home and look after what's left of the estate."

The last sentence upset him worse than ever. Apparently I'd been doing the wrong thing, and doing it all the time. How the dickens was I to know that he'd look on a little Stock Exchange flutter as a shade worse than murder?

"Hang it all," I said, "I was only trying to buck up the family income!"

"And you lost," he hissed, "one hundred pounds—or was it two?"

"Two-fifty-six, eighteen, ten," I admitted. "But I'd sense enough to drop speculating for—"

"For a profession which doth fill the park with an incessant squawking and crowing!"

"You're referring to the chickens?"

He nodded malevolently. It seemed that he'd always hated fowls. Maybe I ought to have remembered that roast capon was supposed to have been the chief item of his last earthly meal.

"They," I said, "were Cubwell's idea. Awfully decent chap, Cubwell, but a bit unpractical. He reckoned that chicken-farming ought to show a profit of about thirty per cent. on the first year's working. He'd got the percentage right enough, but the profit was the other way about. Still, there was a certain amount of sport about the business while it lasted. Any other complaints?"

He pointed with a twitching forefinger to a copy of the *Daily Helio* that lay on a chair near. There was an advertisement of mine on the front page.

"Meaning," I said, "that it strikes you as a bit *infra dig.* for the last of the Delabois to advertise the family mansion in a rag of that sort? But something had to be done, and I've let the place for three months, certain. Jolly good terms too—thanks to you."

"To—to me!" mouthed Uncle Samuel.

"You, laddie. The tenant's a Mr. Lysander Thudd, of Thuddville, Pa., U.S.A. He calls himself the Cracker King, though whether he makes biscuits or fireworks I'm not quite clear. He and his daughter were on the look-out for a genuine manor-house with a ghost to fit, and he read all about you in Jigberry's Guide, and that settled it. He said you were 'the dandiest proposition he'd struck since he left N'York.'"

"And what," said my Uncle Samuel, "will you do?"

"Get digs in town, I expect, and try to turn an honest penny at journalism."

He made a final agonised movement with both bony hands, and vanished. I suppose it was a trifle rough on the old fellow to see the last of the family supplanted by a man with a name like

Thudd. But the chance had been altogether too good to drop. The Thudds were coming down the next afternoon to go over the place—up till then only Pop Thudd had seen it. The train, as usual, was late, and I'd three-quarters of an hour to wait. Gwen Floyd, the rector's niece, was on the platform. I've known Gwen all her life, but she still blushes if she meets a fellow unexpectedly. We talked over village affairs, and she said she hoped I'd lend the Long Meadow for the school sports, as usual.

"Sorry," I said, "but I shan't be in possession. I've let the house to some Americans, and it'll rest with them."

"And you?" said Gwen.

"Oh, I'll be doing the absentee-landlord act in town. I've been offered the dramatic criticism of a new paper that's coming along in a week or so, and I'm going into rooms."

The train slid into the station, and Gwen drifted off. Old Thudd and his daughter skipped out of the compartment before it had fairly come to a standstill. I'd been given to understand that the girl was something worth looking at, and she was. There were no lichens on the fair Mamie. Her eyes and complexion were brilliant enough to fire a powder-factory, and her rig-out would have made most of the women in Bond Street look dowdy.

"I conclude," she said, with a dazzling smile, "that this is Sir Gilbert Delabois, Bt. It's the first time we've located a landlord with half a page of Debrett to his credit, and I'm just crazy to see the house."

"I've the dog-cart outside," I said, and led the way through the station-yard. I'd have introduced them to Gwen, but she'd disappeared.

The park, the gardens, and the house were all too 'cute for words, and the fact that Uncle Samuel didn't put in an appearance in broad daylight seemed the only fly in the Thudd ointment. They arranged to take possession at the end of the week, and I walked back to the station with them in the dusk, and then home.

As I got to the end of Lovers' Path—they've fool names for pretty nearly every thoroughfare in Bunchester—I caught a glimmer of something moving among the blackberry-bushes. I'd an idea that it might be Gwen Floyd, but when I came nearer I saw that it was my Uncle Samuel.

"Want to see me?" I said. "Or is this merely a little casual haunting to fill up the time?"

He glared. Uncle Samuel's glare is one of his biggest assets—one of his hall-marks, like the puce-coloured slippers.

"That—that wench!"

"Meaning Miss Thudd? What's wrong—her accent?"

"Either the baggage leaves the house within a week of her coming or I do!"

"That," I said, "is just flapdoodle—bluff—swank. Because you know as well as I do that a ghost can't drop his legitimate haunting-place like an errand-boy changing his job on pay-day. You're a fixture. And they're jolly good tenants; and, even if they weren't, they're not permanencies. Your mistake," I said, "is in thinking you can dictate terms, on the strength of a couple of centuries' undisturbed occupation."

"Yet from time immemorial—" he raved.

"Wrong again," I said. "Speaking legally, immemorial rights date prior to Richard the Second. And you're only Late Stuart. As matters stand at present, the Thudd family will hail you with delight if you do appear; and if you don't, console yourselves with the oak panelling and the Dutch garden. And that's all there is about it."

Gibbering with fury, he vanished.

A week later saw me in rooms near Westminster. The landlady, though no cook, wasn't worse than most of her class; the new paper looked like being a success; Thudd, at his own suggestion, had insisted on planking down three months' rent in advance; and things in general were rather rosy.

I came back from a performance at the Duke of Lancaster's—it was "The Gondola Girl," and an uncommonly good show—to find Mrs. Boocher, my landlady, huddled up on a chair in the kitchen, moaning.

"Hullo!" I said. "Taken queer? Or is it burglars, or a fire?"

She shook her head feebly.

"It's ghosts, Sir! 'Orrible! In your room, too. I knew the 'ouse was an old one when I came, but I never expected to see a gent with diamond buckles in 'is slippers a-prancin' about on the landin'!"

[Continued overleaf.]

"That's all right," I said. "These confounded lighting regulations have got on your nerves. Brace yourself up with a cup of hot tea or something, and I'll investigate."

I left her protesting that I shouldn't live to tell the tale, and went up. Of course, I saw just what I expected to see—my Uncle Samuel. For the moment he didn't recognise me, and started wagging his head and waving his arms.

"Oh, ring off!" I told him. "That sort of thing's all right as a Society entertainment, but with a chap that's known you all his life it's sheer waste of ghostly energy. What's brought you here?"

"She!" he hissed. "She, and her no less insufferable parent!"

"And, because I won't get rid of them, you come bustling in where you're neither wanted nor expected, and scare a very excellent old lady into hysterics. Confound it all—!"

"Hark ye!" said my Uncle Samuel. "Two nights ago there was summoned a Grand Council of Spectres. I laid my plight before them, and they did grant me full leave to appeal against the coming of these interlopers. Such being the case—"

At this moment the clock on the mantelpiece struck briskly.

"Midnight," I said. "The clock's a second or two fast, but—well, you'd better be going, hadn't you?"

He had gone before I had finished the sentence.

"If you've no objection, Sir"—thus Mrs. Boocher the next morning—"I think it'd be as well if you was to look out for rooms elsewhere. Because, although I ain't blamin' you for the ghost, I 'eard you chattin' with 'im on my way to bed in a manner that fair made my blood curdle. And so—"

"That's all right," I said. "If you've recovered your circulation sufficiently to make out the bill, I'll settle up at once."

It was a jolly day, and there was no particular hardship in house-hunting. As it happened, I found decent rooms almost at once, and then, as there was nothing special doing at the office, decided to run down to Bunchester. I caught the afternoon train, and ran up against Mamie in the High Street. She struck me as looking more vividly handsome than ever. Her father insisted on my staying the night, and offered me the panelled room.

"Unless, Sir Gilbert, you're afraid of meeting that ghost of yours," he said.

"Uncle Samuel and I," I said, "are old friends."

Mamie flashed a glance at me.

"Gee whiz! but I'd give a good deal to have a seventeenth-century ancestor as friendly as all that," she murmured wistfully.

As a matter of fact, Uncle Samuel turned up as I was going to bed. He slithered into the room with a rush that put the candle out, so that I had to grope my way between the blankets.

"You—you have commanded these upstarts to depart?" he asked eagerly. "Especially the brazen-eyed wench?"

"Not quite!" I said. "Why should I? As I said before, they're top-hole tenants, and the girl's pretty enough to advertise a patent tooth-powder."

He indulged in a double-shuffle of pure rage.

"Yet I swear if you wed her—"

"The idea hadn't occurred to me before," I told him. Nor had it. But I'd heard worse suggestions. "But I'll let you know if I do, though I don't suppose it'll be much use asking an uncle's blessing—especially an uncle as remote as you."

"I—I will haunt you both," stuttered Uncle Samuel, "until—"

At that precise moment, a cock crowed—he was the last of the Cubwell lot, and about the earliest riser in the South of England—and Uncle Samuel had to do the vanishing-act again.

"And the ghost?" inquired Mamie, when we met at the breakfast-table.

"Oh, he turned up. And chatty wasn't the word for it."

"Maybe you'll find time to introduce us," said old Thudd.

"For, of course, you're staying for the sports on Saturday?"

I thanked him, and explained that it was out of the question—that there was a new revue at the Gargantuan that I had to write up, but that I'd like to come down later. Mamie herself drove me to the station in the car Thudd had had sent down, and on the way we passed Gwen Floyd. She looked rather white and fagged, I thought. I gathered that the Thudds had got to know her quite well.

"She's a peach!" said Mamie definitely.

I didn't have a visit from Uncle Samuel that night, maybe because he hadn't tracked me to my new rooms. But the night after he turned up in time for a real heart-to-heart talk, and lost his temper after the first two minutes. When he'd found out that Mamie had driven me to the station, the old chap's wrath was something to remember. He plunged, he pirouetted, he flung his bony arms heavenward, he rattled his vertebrae like a missionary collecting-box; he mouthed, he gibbered, he groaned, he gave off enough phosphorescence to start a match-factory. And the more I tried to soothe him, the madder he got. He was still whirling about in a tango of fury when I dropped asleep.

All the next morning I perceived that my landlady had something on her mind. At lunch-time she unloaded it.

"You will remember, Sir, the arrangement made concerning the gas in your room?"

"Quite," I said.

"Then I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself for turning it up so bright that it showed even through the blinds! And the

result is that I've had a summons from the police—*me*, that was never in a police-court in my life—and the man that brought it tells me that I'll be lucky if they let me off with a couple of pounds!"

It wasn't pleasant hearing. But since explanations were impossible, I could only offer to pay the fine, and to clear out at once.

I fancy Uncle Samuel must have overheard enough of our conversation to give him a hint of the value of his own luminosity as a weapon. I saw nothing of him the next night, which I spent at an hotel, nor the night after, and I was beginning to hope that the worst was over when I came across a paragraph in the *Helio* that told me it wasn't. "Zeppelin Bomb on East Coast Mansion," ran the heading, and without actually naming the locality, it went on to supply enough details to make me pretty certain that it was the manor house. And it was. The airship had, it appeared, been sailing peacefully homeward after dropping a few bombs in a forty-acre field, when, attracted by a succession of moving lights, it had stopped and dropped three extras. The bombs had missed the house itself, but had played up gorgeously with a greenhouse and part of the garden. The lights themselves had been seen by various people, none of whom could explain them. By the same morning's post was a letter from Pop Thudd, asking me to come down by an early train to inspect the damage.

I wired a reply, and went. I found Mamie in the garden, staring down into a crater as deep as a house.

"I'm tremendously sorry—" I began.

"Don't apologise," she said quickly. "It isn't your fault that we've decided to strike the home-trail."

"But a nerve-shattering ordeal of that sort—"

She stared.

"Nerve-shattering? Say, are you getting at me, Sir Gilbert? We're leaving because those bangs in the middle of the night, with the anti-aircraft guns chiming in, reminded me of little old N'York, where the cars and the freight-trains and the sirens all yell together, until I just had to tell Pop how homesick I was. Especially since the postman brought this." She produced the portrait of a serious-faced young man with large hands and hair parted with beautiful regularity. "That's Eddy," she explained. "Eddy Van Gomp. His firm makes candies, and he had a row with Pop when they both tried to corner the sugar market. Otherwise, it was up to Eddy to do the Benedick stunt with me. But since Pop's come to the conclusion that the restfulness here sorter suffocates him, and that he's bound to go back soon, I guess Eddy'll get another chance."

"I see," I said.

"Which reminds me," continued Miss Thudd, "that young George Dinniford, the solicitor's son, has been hanging around the village lately. I expect you know him."

"Quite well," I said. "A bigger ass never played the fool with a test-tube."

"Sure?"

"Why?"

"Only that I guess he's doing his best to jump another fellow's claim. As I told Miss Floyd, she's a million times too good for him."

"She's a billion times too good. Still, it's—news."

Miss Thudd nodded.

"That's so. And when you've had your chat with Pop, I guess you might do worse than go round and wish her joy."

And when the details were settled—old Thudd wanted to catch the boat sailing on Friday, and, by the same token, insisted on paying in full for the tenancy—I went. I found Gwen in the rectory garden.

"I suppose," she said brightly, as I came up, "that you've called for congratulations?"

"What about?" I said, and her answer took all the wind out of my sails.

"Coal," she said. "Haven't you met Mr. Dinniford?"

I shook my head.

"He heard you were coming, and went to meet the train. I suppose he missed it."

"Probably. For about the first time since the line's been opened for traffic, we were a minute ahead of schedule."

"He's come home for a holiday, and when the Zeppelins had gone, he went to look at the damage. And he says that the bombs have blown up enough earth to convince him that there's coal on the Delabois property—heaps of it. He'll go into details; probably, when he meets you."

"But I was told," I said—this was when I'd digested the news a bit, "that he was staying in Bunchester for another reason."

She wrinkled her forehead with a puzzled frown. "What do you mean?" Then, as it dawned upon her, she blushed as only Gwen can blush. "What could have put such nonsense into your head!"

I found myself blazing with all sorts of queer, heady emotions.

The wedding was within a couple of months. There was the usual crowd at the church, and the usual well-wishers scattered confetti and slung slippers after us. One, whizzing from an unseen hand, made the horses shy violently before it vanished—for good—in the long grass at the back of the Delabois vault. Gwen and I both saw the thing distinctly. It was made of puce-coloured leather, with a buckle that glittered in the sunlight, and, judging from the pattern, was the type of foot-gear worn by the upper classes about Anno Domini 1670.

THE END.